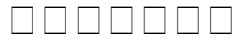


Fashion Revolution China



Abstract:

‘The idea that ones dress might express one’s own unique identity seems naïve these days’

Fashion and Modernity (Breward and Evans, Berg 2006)

However, in the context of China and its economic, social and political development it is clothing that has represented the birth and rebirth of culture by being both dismissive and formative and for much of the 20th century contributed to and reflected on individual expression, modernity and political turmoil.

Spending eight years in Beijing as a Design Educator it was clear there was a paradox between the general external view of China as seen through the eyes of the Western media, with the reality of 21st century urban Chinese living. With the expected militaristic and historical visual references not being particularly evident. It was clear that much of the personal history and memories of change had been disregarded in favour of an economic and contemporary drive for the ‘new’ that had little time for the ‘previous’.

From a fashion design background, the key principles which have driven my academic viewpoint is how dress explores individual identity, as a non-verbal language, in response to a range of social, economic, political and cultural contexts. By archiving garments from China from the 1930’s through to contemporary Chinese fashion designers and recently exhibiting them in the UK under the heading ‘Fashion Revolution China’, many of these themes were both reinforced and specifically illustrated by using dress as cultural artefact.

The exhibition itself followed an almost cyclic journey, with the pre revolutionary pieces using fine Chinese and imported fabrics that incorporate hand embroidery and skilful manufacturing techniques, through to the contemporary designers who are reviving traditional skills and developing modern styles that are embedded with cultural resonance.

Significantly the period post 1949, through to the opening up of China in 1979, although stylistically tempered by a political overview, were crafted with care and precision and have their own inherent beauty.

Ultimately the unique narratives of the artefacts illustrated through their owners or designers, evidence the notion that clothing and style cannot exist in a cultural vacuum yet responded individually to the cultural context.

The paper further investigates the content of the exhibition in terms of the narrative of the clothing and the social and political conditions that supports evolutionary cultural identity. It explores the three specific sections Extravagance/pre 1949, Uniformity/post 1949 and Contemporary designers and discusses how contemporary China is responding and developing a relationship to its fashion past, present and future.

Key Words: China, Fashion, Identity, Culture, Politics, Exhibition.